

46 Intelligibility and Inter-Ethnic Attitudes

HANS WOLFF

1. DATA ON INTELLIGIBILITY between two linguistic media has been used primarily for two purposes: (1) it has served as a convenient criterion for distinguishing the concepts of *language* and *dialect*; (2) in recent years extensive use has been made of such data for the purpose of determining "dialect distance," i.e., the degree of divergence between dialects of the same language or between closely related languages. The present paper explores the significance of linguistic intelligibility and the conclusions that may possibly be drawn from its occurrence. It will be shown that intelligibility data, whether obtained by asking or by testing informants, does not always provide conclusive evidence concerning the linguistic proximity of two dialects or languages; moreover, it is here submitted that linguistic proximity—as established by the comparative method—seems to be of only secondary importance in the establishment and maintenance of interlingual communication. The term "interlingual communication" will be used here to include the meanings of "intelligibility" and "transfer of information," as used by Hickerson, Turner, and Hickerson (1952). On the other hand, intelligibility data may be useful in revealing—at least in certain linguistic areas—the existence of certain inter-ethnic relationships and attitudes, as well as a hierarchy of functional value between different languages or dialects of the same language. Finally, it will be noted from the examples given that the problem of intelligibility is frequently related to the general problem of bilingualism.

Methods for determining degrees of intelligibility between dialects were discussed a number of years ago in a paper by Voegelin and Harria (1951), in which the authors intro-

duced the technique of "testing" the informant. The purpose of such testing is, of course, to determine dialect distance; the technique consists of letting the informant listen to mechanically recorded portions of discourse in another dialect and measuring the amount of correctly translated material. It thus represents a considerable improvement over the older method of simply asking the informant. This method was first successfully used in the field by Hickerson and Turner with languages of the Iroquoian family and has since become an accepted method of solving the language-dialect question (cf. Hickerson, Turner, and Hickerson, 1952; Pierce, 1952; Biggs, 1957). As a measure of dialect distance, however, it also has serious drawbacks.

The principal difficulty arising from the technique—granting, for the moment, that it does indeed provide information on dialect distance—seems to be that several uncontrollable factors enter into the testing situation. We seem to be measuring primarily the informant's ability to react to a strange linguistic medium by more or less appropriate behavior, which we term "translation." While ability to translate obviously presupposes some type of intelligibility, the reverse is not necessarily true. Moreover, the translation or "rendition" is usually made into a third language—English, in the cases known to the writer—thus introducing an additional uncontrollable factor, proficiency in the target language. As a matter of fact, ability to translate appears to involve far more than mere intelligibility. For instance, the writer is thoroughly familiar with Spanish, but finds it difficult—upon sudden demand—to "translate" portions of Spanish discourse into English, partly for

Hymes, Dell, ed. *Language in Culture and Society*. 1964. New York: Harper and Row. pp. 440-45.

Reprinted with slight revisions by the author from *Anthropological Linguistics*, 1959, 1(3):34-41.

reasons of temperament: he dislikes having to translate. It would be absurd to suggest that this proves anything about intelligibility between Spanish and English, about the linguistic "distance" between Spanish and English, or about anything else, for that matter. It seems clear, then, that an informant's ability to translate literally or render freely what he has heard is not a fair test of intelligibility and hence of dialect distance.

Two points are involved here. Anyone who dislikes translating will do less well in rendering language A into language B, no matter how well he may know both A and B. Moreover, he will do less well in rendering dialect X into dialect Y, although, in this case, there is no question as to whether he actually knows (in the sense of having learned Y, being a native speaker of X). However, in either case, the choice is between "ask the informant" and "test the informant." The crucial point is whether the informant—be he asked or tested—has, in his personal life, begun with language A (or dialect X) and has learned, or not learned, language B (or dialect Y). Dialect distance testing is effective under two conditions: (1) that the informant has not, prior to the test, learned the non-native dialect; (2) that the informant is free from any temperamental resistance to translating between his native dialect and one or more dialects with which he is unfamiliar.

Still another factor entering into informant testing is the latter's psycho-cultural reactions to a different linguistic medium and, possibly, to the people who customarily speak it. That such reactions can materially affect intelligibility will be seen from some of the examples cited below. Furthermore, since the test is administered with the aid of recorded materials, the informant's reaction to hearing speech from a lifeless box, rather than in a normal sociolinguistic situation, constitutes another uncontrolled variable.

The problem of dialect distance often arises in areas with a high incidence of bilingualism. In such cases the test will not permit us to distinguish between intelligibility due to linguistic proximity alone and intelligibility due to a language learning process. Finally, the test yields little useful information, when we are faced with the baffling phenomenon of "non-reciprocal" intelligibility (Olmsted, 1954).

From the foregoing it may be seen that several variables affect and determine the degree of linguistic intelligibility or interlingual communication. Since rather more seems involved than equivalence of linguistic units, such as phonemes and morphemes, the question naturally arises what the true significance of intelligibility is. In the following paragraphs we shall discuss several cases of different types of intelligibility and attempt to draw some useful conclusions therefrom.

2.1. While engaged in setting up orthographies for some of the languages of Nigeria a number of years ago, the writer often needed accurate information concerning intelligibility between several dialects spoken in a given area. There were several reasons for this concern. For one, orthography work requires standardization, and it is desirable to choose the standard from among those dialects which enjoy intelligibility over the widest possible area. Moreover, if two linguistic communities claim that there is little or no intelligibility between their respective speech forms, it may be necessary to set up different orthographies or at least to distribute different literacy materials. In connection with his investigations the writer encountered two features which were of interest: (1) the incidence of bilingualism is extremely high all over Nigeria; this is by no means a phenomenon peculiar to Nigeria, but it may well be that some of our conclusions are valid only for areas with a high incidence of bilingualism; (2) in some areas there is a very low correlation between similarity in vocabulary and grammar on the one hand and intelligibility, claimed or proven, on the other. In other words, two dialects might prove to be extremely close when subjected to comparative linguistic analysis, while, at the same time, speakers of these dialects would claim that they could not understand each other. More puzzling, even, was the phenomenon of non-reciprocal intelligibility between two such closely related dialects. Both "asking" and "testing" techniques were used, whenever possible, but the correlation remained low. It became obvious that more than linguistic similarity was involved in insuring a flow of communication between two dialects. The phenomenon might be stated as follows: linguistic (phonemic, morphemic, lexical) similarity between two dialects does not seem to guarantee the possibility of interlingual

communication; similarly, the existence of interlingual communication is not necessarily an indication of linguistic similarity between two such dialects. We illustrate these statements by the series of examples which follow below.

2.2. Nembe and Kalabari of the Eastern Niger Delta belong to the linguistically very homogeneous group of Ijaw languages. On the basis of linguistic comparison Nembe and Kalabari are so similar as to justify their classification as dialects of the same language; the territory occupied by the two groups is geographically contiguous. The intelligibility data curiously contradicts expectations based on comparability. The Nembe freely acknowledge the similarity of the Kalabari dialects to their own and claim to be able to understand speakers of Kalabari. The latter, however, claim that Nembe is a very different language, unintelligible except for scattered word recognition. They answer Nembe claims of intelligibility by maintaining that this would be possible only if any given speaker of Nembe had taken the trouble to learn Kalabari. At the same time they haughtily dismiss as extremely unlikely and farfetched the idea that any Kalabari should bother to learn Nembe. All efforts of the writer to reach some kind of compromise in this area were fruitless, and separate orthographies had to be set up for the two groups. Since the Nembe-Kalabari situation is by no means unique in Nigeria, certain non-linguistic factors are worth mentioning.

The Kalabari are by far the largest and economically most prosperous group in the eastern Delta. They regard the Nembe—and, for that matter, all other Ijaw speaking groups—as poor country cousins, definitely inferior to themselves. They alone, among eastern Delta groups, boast several large towns, such as Abonnema and Buguma; because of their proximity to Port Harcourt and the shipping approaches to that harbor, they have access to much of the lively commercial activity in this area. Nembe and Brass—the two towns of the Nembe territory—have been reduced to the status of miserable fishing villages by the shifting sandbars of the lower Niger. In other words, one might term the Kalabari an “up-and-coming” society, enjoying an economic boom and having access to the more profitable features of civilization, despising the backwater

Nembe, whose political power was broken during the Brass Rebellion several decades ago. Thus, the intelligibility evidence merely seems to underscore Kalabari ascendancy. Whether the Kalabari actually do understand Nembe and merely claim lack of intelligibility for prestige reasons, is, of course, irrelevant. Linguistic communication from Nembe to Kalabari, by means of the Nembe dialect, seems to be non-existent. There is evidence to the effect that either Kalabari or Pidgin English is used in all linguistic communication between Kalabari and Nembe.

2.3. Edo (the language of the kingdom of Benin), Ishan (to the northeast of Benin), and Etsako (in Kukuruku Division, north of Ishan) are three closely related languages of southwestern Nigeria. On the comparability level there are sufficient differences to consider them separate languages, and intelligibility seems to be, at best, fragmentary. Several years ago a group of Benin notables, under the leadership of the Oba, claiming mutual intelligibility for all three groups, proposed to fuse them into one *lingua franca* under the name of “Universal Edo,” which was to contain elements—presumably vocabulary—of all three “dialects.” Actually, Edo informants never claimed to understand Ishan and Etsako, but they did claim that the latter all understood Edo. Ishan and Etsako informants denied the existence of mutual intelligibility, but admitted that many of them understood Edo, because they had lived in Benin City and found employment there. Moreover, Ishan as well as Etsako informants claimed that Edo speakers would understand their languages only when spoken to in a halting, “broken” way, a sort of “pidgin” Ishan or Etsako. All Ishan and Etsako informants were unanimous in their denunciation of the Universal Edo Project as a piece of ill-camouflaged linguistic imperialism, an attempt on the part of Benin to extend its political control. The “Universal Edo Project,” since it would make mass education for a large area much more economical and easier, was rather enthusiastically endorsed by British authorities on the spot. This support served to point up the fact the problem was political rather than linguistic.

The evidence here, as in the preceding example, seems to point up the fact that intelligibility, or interlingual communication,

is a function of intercultural or interethnic trends and relationships. Benin seems to want to extend its cultural prestige, while Ishan and Etsako speakers—happy enough to recognize the Oba of Benin as their spiritual leader—jealously try to guard their linguistic along with their political independence.

2.4. In the Urhobo area of southwestern Nigeria we find an example of what might be termed "vanishing" intelligibility. Urhobo, spoken in several dialects in the western Niger Delta, belongs to the Edo Group and is therefore related to Edo and Benin. However, there is no intelligibility, demonstrated or claimed, between Urhobo and Edo. The Okpe-Isoko dialects are rather divergent from the rest of Urhobo, but until recently there was general agreement that mutual intelligibility was relatively high among all Urhobo dialects. Lately, however, speakers of Isoko have been claiming that their language is different from the rest of Urhobo, and that intelligibility between Urhobo and Isoko is not sufficient for normal linguistic communication. This claim has coincided with Isoko demands for greater political autonomy and ethnic self-sufficiency. Surprisingly enough, the speakers of the Okpe dialects—almost identical with Isoko—continue to consider themselves ethnically part of the Urhobo area and claim mutual intelligibility with the majority of Urhobo dialects.

2.5. Our last example, though different from the preceding ones, may aid in further clarifying the problem.

Abuan is a language spoken in the town and surrounding countryside of Abua on the mainland portion of the eastern Niger Delta. Structurally, it is quite different from other languages in the Delta. Outside the town of Abua there is a small settlement of Degema speakers, engaged in fishing in the creek, an activity in which the yam-growing Abuans are not interested. Degema is a splinter language of the Edo Group, totally unintelligible to Abuan. The homeland of the Degema speech community, one of several Edo splinter groups in the eastern Delta, is at Opu Degema, near the Kalabari capital of Abonnenma. However, since the Degema sell some of their fish in the Abua market, there is, of course, some linguistic communication. It is entirely in Abuan. Learning Abuan is simply the price the Degema pay in return for being permitted

residence and economic activity in the area. Such linguistic communication is commented on by the Abuans as follows: "the Degema can understand us and talk to us; therefore, our languages must be related." This linguistically naïve comment is nevertheless significant, since it presents the problem in a nutshell: linguistic communication, involving a certain type of intelligibility (non-reciprocal), exists because cultural factors provide a basis for it. Comparability does not enter into the picture. Moreover, no sane Abuan would dream of learning Degema. Many more cases illustrating this phenomenon could be mentioned, such as intelligibility data from Bura-Pabir, Kilba, Margi and Higi of Adamawa and Bornu Provinces, the Kana-Gokana speech area of Ogoni Division in the eastern Delta, and the different Chamba speaking groups of the northern Cameroons and Adamawa.

3.1. The foregoing illustrations raise a number of questions, not only as to the nature of intelligibility or the factors requisite for establishing and maintaining it, but also as to the significance which the existence of intelligibility has. Furthermore, in a given geographic area, does the occurrence of differential intelligibility—i.e., the fact that it exists between some groups mutually, between others non-reciprocally, between still others not at all—yield any useful non-linguistic information about such an area? To what extent is there a correlation between bilingualism and different types of intelligibility? What, if anything, does the absence of interlingual communication between two closely related linguistic media indicate? We shall have to limit ourselves, in the following, to a few tentative suggestions.

Obviously, intensive research into the nature of intelligibility and into the linguistic as well as non-linguistic requisites of interlingual communication is needed. At this point we can only draw the simplest working diagram to indicate what is going on. When an informant admits or claims that he understands another linguistic medium, he merely indicates that information travels to him via this other medium. Schematically, $X \rightarrow A$, where A is the informant, and X represents a language other than his own. Similarly, a claim that the informant's language is understood by others means that information travels to others via his

language; schematically, $A \rightarrow X$, where A is the informant's language and X the speaker(s) of another language. In the same manner, mutual intelligibility could be represented as $X \rightleftharpoons A$ and total lack of intelligibility as $X - A$. Admittedly, these are unsatisfactory diagrams. What is meant by "information"? Is it what the speaker meant to convey, or merely information as to what language or dialect is involved? Could the informant react intelligently and properly to such information? Could he, or would he want to, talk to the person who sent this information? None of these questions can be answered until we have an operational model of linguistic intelligibility.

As to the question of the significance of intelligibility, the following answers suggest themselves. On the basis of the evidence presented above we may say that the existence of interlingual communication (involving various types of intelligibility) indicates the presence of certain non-linguistic factors which make such communication possible (or feasible or desirable). The evidence does not suggest, however, that linguistic similarity is a decisive requisite. Such similarity may, of course, determine the facility, viz., the speed with which interlingual communication is established, as well as being a factor in determining the number of individuals involved in such communication. Thus, if the languages are entirely unrelated, only a limited number of speakers—those participating in the cultural contact—may actually participate in the linguistic communication, being the only ones with opportunity to hear and learn the other language. The exact nature and variety of the above extra-linguistic factors is another problem for future research. At any rate, intelligibility data would not seem sufficient for determining linguistic proximity between dialects of the same language nor a sound basis for distinguishing dialect differences from language differences.

A further factor which deserves consideration in this connection is the existence, in many areas of the world, of languages with a high functional value, in the sense that the speaking and understanding of such languages entails certain specific advantages. An acquaintance of the writer's recently classified languages into "practical" and "impractical" languages, assigning Hungarian, her native language, to the impractical group and refusing to teach it

to her children. This is exactly what is meant here. Such languages are likely to command far greater intelligibility than others, regardless of the degree of lexical or morphemic similarity which may be involved. Thus, speakers of Angas, in the Nigerian Plateau, will overwhelmingly admit the intelligibility of Hausa, though the similarity is very slight, apparent only to the trained comparativist. On the other hand, very few Angas understand Sura, which is geographically adjacent and linguistically very close to Angas. A European parallel would be for most Germans to claim that Persian was intelligible, while only a few admitted that they could understand Dutch. The point of the Nigerian example is, of course, that Hausa, the lingua franca of the Northern Region, has a very high functional value: it is the language of the market place and of communication with outsiders in general.

3.2. The following statements are submitted as a summary. Whether they are generally applicable or have validity only in certain linguistic areas, will depend on further research in the field of intelligibility in general and in different linguistic areas in particular.

1. In a given area, interlingual communication—involving any one of different types of intelligibility—takes place, when cultural factors are favorable to such communication. Linguistic similarity, although it may play a limiting or boosting role, is not a decisive factor. The phrase "cultural factors favorable ..." is deliberately vague. Obviously, a great variety of factors and circumstances come into play; these should be the subject of future research.

2. As a corollary to (1), the existence of interlingual communication is indicative of the existence of the above favorable cultural factors. Linguistic proximity may be involved here, but it can not be predicated on the existence of intelligibility alone.

3. In an area with high incidence of bilingualism the absence of intelligibility between two linguistically close dialects is indicative of the presence of "negative" factors which prevent interlingual communication.

4. When intelligibility is non-reciprocal, the language or dialect spoken by the culturally dominant group, or the language or dialect with the greater functional value, seems to be the preferred medium for interlingual communication.

In conclusion, we put forward the following query: is it possible to determine the culturally dominant group in a given area by determining which language or dialect has the most wide-

spread intelligibility? In other words, is it possible to speak of a "pecking order" of intelligibility?

REFERENCE NOTE

On related aspects of the problem of boundaries, see references on dialectology with McDavid's article in Part VIII. On related aspects of the problem of selective intelligibility and measurement of distance, see Garde (1961), Hockett (1958, chap. 38), McQuown (1958), Moser (1954), Reyburn (1956), Salisbury (1962), Stankiewicz (1957), and Weinreich (1962). Note also the article by Ferguson and its references on pp. 429-439 and those by Haas, Diebold, and Dozier in Part VIII.

References not in the general bibliography:

BIGGS, BRUCE

1957. Testing Intelligibility Among Yuman Languages. *IJAL*, 23: 57-62.

HICKERSON, H., GLEN D. TURNER, NANCY P. HICKERSON

1952. Testing Procedures for Estimating Transfer of Information Among Iroquois Dialects and Languages. *IJAL*, 18: 1-8.

MCQUOWN, NORMAN A.

1958. Measures of Dialect Distance in Tzeltal-Tzotzil. *Report on the Ninth Annual Round Table Meeting on Linguistics and Language Teaching*. (Monograph Series on Languages and Linguistics, No. 11.) Washington, D.C.: Georgetown University.

MOSER, HUGO

1954. Sprachgrenzen und ihre Ursachen. *Zeitschrift für Mundartforschung*, 22: 87-111.

OLMSTED, DAVID L.

1954. Achumawi-Atsugewi Non-Reciprocal Intelligibility. *IJAL*, 20: 181-184

PIERCE, JOE E.

1952. Dialect Distance Testing in Algonquian. *IJAL*, 18: 203-210.

1954. Crow vs. Hidatsa in Dialect Distance and in Glottochronology. *IJAL*, 20: 134-136.